

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Biutiful** (2010)

Alejandro González Iñárritu

### **OVERVIEW**

*Biutiful* continues the exploration of the surprising interconnectivities of people in the world as Uxbal, a terminally ill low-level criminal involved in human and counterfeit goods trafficking, tries to assure the safety and security of his young children. Barcelona represents a convergence of people seeking a better life and looking for a gateway to Europe, but who are stuck in the portal and unable to move. And, just as the people from Senegal and China are unable to physically move, the spirits of the dead people that Uxbal, who has a sixth sense, sees, are stuck in their transit from earth to wherever they are to go. Director Alejandro González Iñárritu creates a *Notes from the Underground* world where the real and the unreal are interchangeable. Sometimes the false has more valuable than the real – it is, at least alive in the world of phenomena (that is, it has a body, a tactile presence, while the “real” shows itself to be an illusion, a hopeless longing, an idea of something that could be a manifestation of perfection. *Biutiful* received many awards and recognitions, including two nominations for Academy Awards, and a “win” for Best Actor at the Cannes Film Festival in 2011.

### **CHARACTERS**

**Uxbal** man diagnosed with terminal prostate cancer who earns a living helping smuggle illegal aliens and counterfeit luxury items; also works occasionally as a psychic medium

**Li Wei** The “snakehead” who runs the human trafficking business, smuggling Chinese into Barcelona

**Marambra** Uxbal’s mother, who suffers from alcoholism and drug addiction, bipolar disorder, and earns her living as a prostitute

**Ana** - Uxbal’s young daughter

**Mateo** Uxbal’s young son

**Bea** Uxbal’s friend and alternative medicine practitioner

### **THE STORY**

Uxbal, a low-level criminal who works with organized crime in Barcelona, Spain, lives in a low-rent apartment in Barcelona with his two young children, Ana and Mateo.

The movie opens and Uxbal is in snowy woods, talking about the sounds of the ocean, the embodiment of all the voyages of one’s life (physical or psychological). Uxbal is talking to a younger man; the man is his father when he was young, at the moment he disappeared from Uxbal’s life.

Uxbal is estranged from his wife, Marambra, the mother of Ana and Mateo. Her bipolar disorder and alcoholism have wrecked her life, and she now earns money in prostitution.

Uxbal learns that he is dying of prostate cancer. He has no one to turn to except his brother, for whom he has very mixed emotions, given that Marambra (his estranged wife) uses her services as a prostitute.

We enter Uxbal's life just as he enters a personal crisis. He is dying, and he does not know how to assure himself of the safety of his children. Marambra is utterly lost in addiction and self-destruction to be trusted them.

There seems to be very little protection for the vulnerable in this world: Uxbal works for a syndicate that smuggles Chinese and their cheap counterfeit luxury goods to be sold by poor illegal African immigrants from Senegal. Uxbal's job is to find work for the undocumented immigrants. It is precarious work, and they must hide in the shadows in dangerous locations. And, even though Uxbal pays bribes to the police, it is not enough, and the Africans he has smuggled in are arrested for dealing drugs.

He can't find work for the Chinese. Finally, he begs his brother to take them for some construction work. They must live in a very cold warehouse, which worries Uxbal, so he buys them a space heater. Unfortunately, the ventilation is poor, and all die of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Other aspects of his life are falling apart as well. His prostate cancer is progressing rapidly, and he is urinating blood, a fact that is witnessed by his daughter, Ana, who explains to him that she understands that he is dying.

The hallucinatory aspects of the film intensify as Uxbal begins to see the spirits of the dead, who communicate messages to him. He has always had that ability, but now that he is dying and also tortured by his unintentional role in the death of the Chinese immigrants, Uxbal finds that the ghosts of the dead are with him constantly. They float in the air and hover just under ceilings. They speak to him, and encourage him to pay special heed to Bea, an alternative healer.

Bea gives him two black gemstones. He is to give them to his children before he dies. In the meantime, the Senegalese street sellers are not able to get out of jail. Ege, the wife of one of the jailed Senegalese wants to return home, but she promises Uxbal that she will take care of his children. Uxbal gives her the two black stones and all of his savings. Bedridden, and in and out of consciousness, he continues to commune with the dead, and to go back to the snowy woods where he speaks to his father about the sound of the ocean.

Ege goes to the train station with Uxbal's money, but at the last moment, decides to return. In the meantime, Uxbal gives Ana a diamond ring that his father gave to his mother. Uxbal dies.

In the end, Uxbal is in the snowy woods again, speaking to his father, who died before Uxbal was born. Uxbal's father died in Mexico, where he planned to start a business and then call for his wife and children to join him. Unfortunately, he died before that was possible.

## **THEMES**

**This Is Real:** The cinematography of *Iñárritu* emphasizes the reality of the situation, and has an almost documentary sense. He uses a number of over-the-shoulder shots and point of view shots that give the film a kind of authenticity and intimacy. For example, when the protagonist urinates blood in the public toilet, we see, over his shoulder, the stream of orange-red fluid hitting the toilet bowl water.

**Reflecting on One's Life at the End of Life:** The movie starts with a vision of Uxbal and a young man speaking about wind noises as they stand in a cold, snowy forest. The film ends in the same way. In the space of the film, the viewer, in a very voyeuristic way, follows the trajectory of a man who knows he is dying, and he has much unfinished business, and has had a life marked by tragedy, disappointment, and loss. In many ways, there are echoes of Hemingway's "The Snows of Mount Kilimanjaro" and Horacio Quiroga's "A la deriva." In the case of *Beautiful*, the quick cuts feel like flashbacks, and the intimate looks at his relationship with this young children, the squalor of life in the midst of human trafficking and counterfeit goods smuggling make it

impossible to romanticize anything about his life. But, there is always the desire for connection, and thus, he sees the ghosts of people just after they have died, and they speak to him.

**Receiving Messages from the Other Side:** In *Biutiful*, it is possible for those who have just died to communicate with those who are alive, and receptive to the messages. The messages do not bring peace: in the case of a young boy who has recently died, the message that “He is well. He would like to ask forgiveness, though, for stealing your watch,” makes the father freeze, and the mother scream in anger. The other beings he sees on his ceiling simply watch him, or, as in the case of the young man in the snowy woods, simply talk about the wind. In other words, the messages are indeterminate, and the lurking fear in the movie is that all messages and all of communication lurks on the edge of indeterminacy.

**Flawed Mothers:** Marambra, the mother of Ana and Mateo cannot be trusted to take care of them, even though she does love her children. She suffers from bipolar disorder and struggles with addiction. In order to survive, she has turned to prostitution. In one scene, she vertiginously dances / staggers around Tito, who is speaking on the phone. She smokes, carries a glass of wine, and mocks him as she seems to be offering a sexual encounter. As he acquiesces, she slaps him and runs off.

**“A Passage to Hope?” vs Human Trafficking:** The Chinese and Senegalese who have paid for passage to Europe are definitely not in the paradise they thought they’d be encountering. Instead, they are trapped as pawns to be placed in dank factories or in hustling designer knockoffs. They live in the shadows and are not known by their names, just as statistics as they die tragic deaths from carbon monoxide poisoning, or are locked up in a Spanish jail.

**The Real vs. The Fake:** Counterfeit Goods are a powerful metaphor in *Biutiful* for the primary dialectic in the film. What is real? What is fake? Most of the grimy, terrible criminal underworld is built on false promises and delusions about a bright future. When the Senegalese street hustlers spread out their wares on the street, they sell access to status. In addition, they sell drugs, which enslave the users in addiction. Barcelona of the early 2000s is the Paris of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### Uxbal

*Clairvoyant:* People pay Uxbal to sit with the recently deceased and to wait for the spirit to appear and give him a message. In the first few minutes of the film, we see Uxbal attend a wake, and then go into a room in a very old funeral home where the bodies of three young boys are lying in their caskets. Uxbal has been hired to sit with one of the dead boys and to be mindful of different questions. As he sits and prays, Uxbal

*Obsessive Feelings of Guilt:* Uxbal is desperate to find work for the Chinese undocumented immigrants. He finally convinces his brother, Tito, to find work for them on a construction site. However, the only place for them to stay is a cold room. It is winter, and so Uxbal finds a space heater. They die of carbon monoxide poisoning, and Uxbal starts to see more phantoms and still, quiet bodies who sit in chairs, float on the ceiling. Their presence torments him, as does the recognition that he will leave his two children without anyone who can take care of them.

*Responsible:* Uxbal is a low-level criminal, but he is caring, decent human being who attempts to rescue the deeply mentally ill Marambra, find places for the boatloads of Chinese and Senegalese to work, and to make sure his children have a nutritious breakfast, and a home, however squalid, to come home to. *Biutiful* in no way glamorizes the underground, or the life of crime, but instead paints it as one of the few options open to many people in society. As a result, they live in the shadows, and a parallel universe in the “informal” economy that few wish to openly acknowledge, but which actually powers the formal economy of a developed Spain. It is a

reminder of colonialism, and a look into a post-colonial world of mercantilism (drugs and counterfeit goods instead of cotton and tobacco) and slavery (shadowy and informal, rather than with actual deeds and titles to people's lives).

*Notes from the Underground Dostoevsky-esque Character:* Unlike a character from Dostoevsky, Uxbal is not sinking from a life of respectability to one of madness. Instead, Uxbal is transitioning from a hard, disappointing life in the shadowy margins of society, where he works with the exploited and disenfranchised, to whatever lies on the other side of death. He works frantically in those final days, taking care of his children. Ana recognizes that he is dying, and she stays with him. Mateo is frightened and sleepwalks at night. In the end, he lies on his bed, Ana stays with him. He gives her the diamond ring that his mother owned, and then he dies. One knows that Ana and Mateo will be cared for, and yet there is no happy ending. Simply a view of lives that the world would prefer not to see, choosing flashy designer goods and dining in restaurants built and made possible through the toil of the undocumented.

*Postmodernist Gothic:* The quick cuts, over-the-shoulder shots, and the use of chiaroscuro gives the film a gothic feeling. The scenes in the "velatorio" where three small coffins lie open, and banks of candles lie on the side, is perhaps one of the most gothic scenes in the film.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. When Uxbal goes to the doctor, he learns he is terminally ill with prostate cancer. There is very little he can do. How does he react to his situation? How do we know just how sick he is? How does the director communicate his condition without having Uxbal describe it in words to another person? Please find at least two scenes or situations that show Uxbal's declining health and please describe them.
2. Uxbal has a sixth sense. He is able to see the spirits of people who have recently died. But, he does not describe his abilities, nor does he discuss its impact on him. Please find three scenes that illustrate Uxbal's sixth sense and describe what happens, and how Uxbal reacts.
3. Uxbal cares deeply about his children, and also about the welfare of those who are involved in the human and counterfeit goods trafficking (smuggling) activities. Explain how Uxbal tries to make their lives, better and how he either succeeds or falls short.

ILLUSTRATIVE SCENES



This is the official movie poster and social media marketing piece for the movie, *Biutiful* (2010).



Uxbal walks down a street in Barcelona, weighed down by his concerns for his children, the situation of the Chinese who have been smuggled in, and the Senegalese street peddlers, who are about to be deported.



The snowy woods where Uxbal speaks to a young man, who it turns out, is his father, who died on his way to Mexico where he wanted to establish a better life and then call for his wife and children. The scene is a powerful visual allusion to Rene Magritte, whose painting, "The Blank Signature" contains the image of a horse and rider in a copse of trees, but it is a fantastic, impossible representation, which questions the nature of reality.



Uxbal is in a funeral home where he watches the corpses of three young boys who have recently died. Uxbal has a sixth sense which allows him to see the spirit of the departed as they sometimes communicate with him. In this case, the parents have hired Uxbal to try to find out if their recently deceased young son has a message for them. Uxbal does see the spirit of the young son, but he is simply in a chair. He does not actually communicate, and what does transpire is indeterminate in nature. There is a profound questioning of the nature of reality and communication.





### The family eating dinner

Uxbal is at home in his small apartment, and he eats dinner with his two young children and their mother Marambra, with whom Uxbal is separated. He tries to help Marambra but her serious problems with mental illness and addiction finally make it impossible to do so.



We'll celebrate her birthday  
when you get back.

This is a screenshot that illustrates Iñárritu's use of color and lighting that intensifies the sense of alienation and loneliness in a hard, urban setting where people are always on the verge of great harm, either from working in harsh conditions, having no safety net, being arrested or deported, or having no few options for maintaining human contact.



This is a scene from the cold industrial space where the illegally smuggled Chinese workers slept together and then died, due to carbon monoxide poisoning and a space heater.



Uxbal walks with Ana and Mateo. In this scene, the colors are clear as in daylight, as opposed to all the nocturnal or indoor scene, where the colors are washed in blue, emphasizing an artificial, indoors, and potentially unreal or even hyper-real consciousness.





The final scene in which Uxbal returns to the snowy woods. The young man who speaks to him is revealed to be his father, who died at a young age in transit to Mexico, where he sought a better life for his wife and family.